Supreme Court, U.S.
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No.

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

OCTOBER TERM, 1999

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA;
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE
STATE OF CALIFORNIA, *Petitioners*,

v.

DON SOON PARK, *Respondent*.

ON PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE
UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

California prohibits review of claims on state habeas which should have been raised on direct appeal (In re Dixon, 41 Cal.2d 756, 759, 264 P.2d 513 (1953)), with a state-law exception for a "clear and fundamental constitutional violation striking at the heart of the trial process." In re Harris, 5 Cal.4th 813, 836, 855 P.2d 391 (1993). The adequate and independent state ground doctrine, which precludes federal habeas courts from considering procedurally defaulted claims, "is grounded in concerns of comity and federalism." Coleman v. Thompson, 501 U.S. 722, 730 (1991).

1. Did the Ninth Circuit violate comity by holding that the Dixon rule was not independent of federal law based on its finding that the California Supreme Court "acknowledged" in In re Robbins, 18 Cal.4th 770, 814, n. 34, 959 P.2d 311 (1998), that in determining whether to apply the state-law fundamental-error exception for a Dixon default, the state court necessarily decided the merits of federal claims, despite the state court's assertion in Robbins that "in no event is merit review invariable or obligatory when a procedural bar applies?" Robbins, 18 Cal.4th at 778, n. 1.

2. Did the Ninth Circuit err in concluding that the application of a fundamental-error exception for a state procedural bar renders the bar dependent on federal law, thus contradicting dicta from this Court and creating an intercircuit conflict requiring resolution by this Court?

3. Did the Ninth Circuit violate O'Sullivan v. Boerckel, 526 U.S. 838 (1999), by holding that a prisoner who fails to present his claims on direct appeal does not default those claims in federal court if he later files a state habeas petition in hopes of obtaining discretionary collateral review of the claims?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI	1
OPINIONS BELOW	1
JURISDICTION	2
STATUTORY PROVISIONS	2
STATEMENT OF THE CASE	2
REASONS FOR GRANTING THE WRIT	7
ARGUMENT	11
I. THE NINTH CIRCUIT ERRED IN HOLDING THAT THE CALIFORNIA SUPREME COURT "ACKNOWLEDGED" THAT IN APPLYING ITS FUNDAMENTAL ERROR EXCEPTION FOR PROCEDURAL BARS, IT NECESSARILY REACHED AND DETERMINED ALL UNDERLYING FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONAL CLAIMS	11
II. THE NINTH CIRCUIT'S HOLDING THAT THE APPLICATION OF A FUNDAMENTAL ERROR EXCEPTION FOR A STATE PROCEDURAL BAR RENDERS THE BAR DEPENDENT ON FEDERAL	

TABLE OF CONTENTS, CONT'D

LAW CONFLICTS WITH TWO DECISIONS FROM THIS COURT AND WITH OTHER CIRCUIT DECISIONS 19

III. THE NINTH CIRCUIT VIOLATED O'SULLIVAN V. BOERCKEL BY FINDING THAT THE FILING OF THE STATE HABEAS PETITION LIFTED THE BAR TO FEDERAL COURT REVIEW 24

IV. THE NINTH CIRCUIT ERRED BY SUBJECTING CALIFORNIA'S PROCEDURAL RULES TO A MORE STRINGENT STANDARD THAN IT APPLIES TO THE INVOCATION OF A PARALLEL FEDERAL PROCEDURAL DEFAULT RULE 28

CONCLUSION 30

Index to Appendixes

Appendix A: Second Opinion of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals 31a

Appendix B: First Opinion of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals 55a

Appendix C: Opinion of the District Court 74a

TABLE OF CONTENTS, CONT'D

Appendix D: Orders of the California Supreme Court Denying Review and Habeas Corpus 97a

Appendix E: Opinion of the California District Court of Appeal 99a

Appendix F: Order of the Ninth Circuit Denying Rehearing 105a

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Cases	Page
Abatino v. United States, 750 F.2d 1442 (9th Cir. 1984)	29
Andrews v. Deland, 943 F.2d 1162 (10th Cir. 1991)	21
Arizonans for Official English v. Arizona, 520 U.S. 43 (1997)	17
Calderon v. U. S. District Court (Bean), 96 F.3d 1126 (9th Cir. 1996)	11
Calderon v. U.S. District Court (Hayes), 103 F.3d 72 (9th Cir. 1996)	11
Coleman v. Thompson, 501 U.S. 722 (1991)	7
Davis v. United States, 411 U.S. 233 (1973)	29
Edwards v. Carpenter, 120 S. Ct. 1587, 2000 U.S. LEXIS 2992, *13-14 (2000)	24
Engle v. Isaac, 456 U.S. 107 (1981)	19
Fields v. Calderon, 125 F.3d 757 (9th Cir. 1997)	11

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES, CONT'D

Fiore v. White,
120 S. Ct. 469 (1999) 17

Gutierrez v. Moriarity,
922 F.2d 1464 (0th Cir. 1991) 20

Harris v. Reed,
489 U.S. 255 (1989) 26

Havey v. Hubbard,
2000 U.S. App. LEXIS 8871
(9th Cir. May 1, 2000) 8

In re Clark,
5 Cal.4th 750, 855 P.2d 729 (1993) 12

In re Dixon
41 Cal.2d 756, 264 P.2d 513 (1953) 3, 8, 11

In re Harris,
5 Cal.4th 813, 855 P.2d 391 (1993) 4, 12

In re Robbins,
18 Cal.4th 770, 959 P.2d 311 (1998) 5, 8, 23

In re Winchester,
53 Cal.2d 528, 348 P.2d 904 (1960) 22

Jackson v. Calderon,
2000 U.S. App. LEXIS 9049
(9th Cir. May 8, 2000) 8

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES, CONT'D

La Crosse v. Kernan,
2000 U.S. App. LEXIS 7348
(9th Cir. April 24, 2000) 8

McCown v. Callahan,
726 F.2d 1 (1st Cir. 1984) 21

Morales v. Calderon,
85 F.3d 1387 (9th Cir. 1996) 11

Mu'Min v. Pruett,
125 F.3d 192 (4th Cir. 1997) 21

Murray v. Carrier,
477 U.S. 478 (1986) 8

Neal v. Gramley,
99 F.3d 841 (7th Cir. 1996) 21

O'Sullivan v. Boerckel,
526 U.S. 838 (1999) 10

Park v. California, et al.,
202 F.3d 1146 (9th Cir. 2000) 6

Reed v. Ross,
468 U.S. 1 (1984) 8

Simpson v. Matesanz,
175 F.3d 200 (1st Cir. 1999) 10, 21

Siripongs v. Calderon,
35 F.3d 1308 (9th Cir. 1994) 11

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES, CONT'D

Smith v. Murray,
477 U.S. 527 (1986) 8

Sochor v. Florida,
504 U.S. 527 (1992) 19

Tarver v. Hopper,
169 F.3d 710 (11th Cir. 1999) 21

Teague v. Lane,
489 U.S. 288 (1989) 26

United States v. Dunham,
767 F.2d 1395 (9th Cir. 1985) 29

United States v. Frady,
456 U.S. 152 (1982) 29

United States v. Johnson,
988 F.2d 941 (9th Cir. 1993) 29

Washington v. Cambra,
208 F.3d 832 (9th Cir. 2000) 8

Willis v. Aiken,
8 F.3d 556 (7th Cir. 1993) 20

Wilson v. Moore,
178 F.3d 266 (4th Cir. 1999) 21

Ylst v. Nunnemaker,
501 U.S. 797 (1991) 25

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES, CONT'D

Constitutional Provisions

Cal. Const., § 4 1/2 art. VI 22

Statutes

28 U.S.C. § 2254 4

28 U.S.C. § 2255 29

Court Rules

Cal. Rules of Court, Rule 29.5 6

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

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No.

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA;
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA,
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DON SOON PARK, *Respondent*.

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

Petitioners, the People of the State of California and the Attorney General of the State of California, respectfully pray that a writ of certiorari issue to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

OPINIONS BELOW

The amended opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, filed on January 21, 2000, appears at Appendix A to the petition and is reported at 202 F.3d 1146 (9th Cir. 2000). The first opinion of the court of appeals, filed on January 14, 1999 and withdrawn on January 21, 2000, appears at Appendix B and is reported at 164 F.3d 1226 (9th Cir. 1999). The unreported opinion of the district court appears at Appendix C.

The California Supreme Court's orders denying respondent's petition for review, and denying his petition for writ of habeas corpus on the procedural ground of failure to raise the claims on appeal, appear at Appendix D. The California Court of Appeal's unreported opinion affirming respondent's conviction can be found at Appendix E. The order of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals regarding the petition for rehearing appears at Appendix F.

JURISDICTION

The Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit issued its amended opinion on January 21, 2000, and denied the petition for rehearing and suggestion for rehearing en banc on March 9, 2000. Appendix F. The jurisdiction of this Court is timely invoked under 28 U.S.C. §1254(1).

STATUTORY PROVISIONS

Section 2254 of Title 28 of the United States Code provides in pertinent part:

> (a) The Supreme Court, a Justice thereof, a circuit judge, or a district court shall entertain an application for a writ of habeas corpus in behalf of a person in custody pursuant to the judgment of a State court only on the ground that he is in custody in violation of the Constitution or laws or treaties of the United States.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Don Soon Park was charged in two cases with a total of seven felonies. The charges related to separate criminal incidents against two victims. Four of the crimes involved Munho Kim, and three others involved Keum

Kim. The trial court consolidated the cases over Park's objection.

A jury convicted Park in 1994 of five of the charges, and acquitted him of the other two. Park was found guilty of the four crimes against Munho Kim, including conspiracy to commit robbery, conspiracy to commit burglary, first degree residential burglary, and attempted first degree residential robbery, with a finding that Park was a principal armed with a firearm as to each count. The jury also convicted Park of making terrorist threats against Keum Kim, but acquitted him of the counts charging use of a destructive device to injure or destroy and arson of a structure. The trial court sentenced Park to seven years and eight months in prison on June 1, 1994.

When Park appealed the judgment of conviction, he raised only a single issue. He contended that the state trial court erred in consolidating the charges in the two cases. The California Court of Appeal rejected this claim and affirmed the judgment on September 20, 1995. Appendix E. Park then filed a petition for direct review in the California Supreme Court, again raising only the consolidation claim. The Supreme Court denied the petition for review on November 29, 1995. Appendix D.

Park filed a petition for a writ of habeas corpus in the California Supreme Court on February 2, 1996, raising three entirely new claims he had not presented on direct appeal. Park alleged (1) prosecutorial misconduct in failing to disclose a witness's informant status; (2) abuse of the trial court's discretion in admitting a tape of Park's jailhouse conversations with a co-conspirator into evidence; and (3) denial of the right to a speedy trial and to effective assistance of counsel due to the prosecution's delay in bringing the charges. On March 27, 1996, the California Supreme Court entered the following order regarding Park's habeas petition: "Petition for writ of habeas corpus DENIED. (See In re Dixon (1953) 41 Cal.2d 756, 759, 264 P.2d 513.)" Appendix D.

In Dixon, the California Supreme Court held that the "general rule is that habeas corpus cannot serve as a substitute for an appeal, and, in the absence of special circumstances constituting an excuse for failure to employ that remedy, the writ will not lie where the claimed errors could have been, but were not, raised upon a timely appeal from a judgment of conviction." Dixon, 41 Cal.2d at 759. In In re Harris, 5 Cal.4th 813, 855 P.2d 391 (1993), the Supreme Court clarified the legal standard for the four exceptions it recognizes to forgive a Dixon default, the first of which is an exception for a "clear and fundamental constitutional violation striking at the heart of the trial process." Harris, 5 Cal.3d at 829-36.

Park filed a petition for writ of habeas corpus in the district court on April 22, 1996. 28 U.S.C. § 2254(a). The federal petition presented five claims: (1) erroneous consolidation of the charges; (2) prosecutorial misconduct in failing to disclose that a witness had been a government informant; (3) abuse of discretion by the state trial court in admitting evidence of a secret jailhouse tape; (4) denial of the right to a speedy trial; and (5) ineffective assistance of trial counsel.

In an order filed on September 20, 1996, the district court dismissed the consolidation claim on the merits, holding that Park's federal constitutional rights had not been violated by the joinder of the charges. The district court then dismissed the remaining four claims on the ground that Park had defaulted them on procedural grounds in the California courts by failing to present them on direct appeal, as evidenced by the California Supreme Court's citation of Dixon in denying the state habeas petition. The district court also found that Park had failed to show cause and prejudice to excuse his state default. Appendix C.

Park filed a notice of appeal. Although the district court denied a certificate of probable cause, the court of appeals granted one. While Park's appeal was pending in

the Ninth Circuit, the California Supreme Court issued its decision in In re Robbins, 18 Cal.4th 770, 959 P.2d 311 (1998). In Robbins, the court explained the operation of its "timeliness" bar for habeas petitions, and included other brief comments on various aspects of the court's habeas practices. The court stated that when it imposed the Dixon bar for claims that should have been raised on appeal, the court intended to signify that none of the four state-law exceptions to that bar applied, including the exception for a "clear and fundamental constitutional violation striking at the heart of the trial process." Robbins, 18 Cal.4th at 814, n. 34. The court also stated that "[i]n no event is merit review invariable or obligatory when a procedural bar applies." Id. at 778, n. 1.

On January 14, 1999, the Ninth Circuit filed an opinion affirming in part, reversing in part, and remanding. Appendix B. The court affirmed the district court's rejection of Park's claim that the consolidation of the charges against him in a single trial violated federal due process. However, the Ninth Circuit reversed the district court's order dismissing the remaining claims as procedurally defaulted in state court for failure to raise them on direct appeal. The court held that California's Dixon bar was not independent of federal law, and thus could not bar federal habeas review of federal constitutional claims. The court reached this conclusion by finding that the California Supreme Court had "acknowledged" in Robbins that California's state-law fundamental-constitutional-error exception for procedural defaults encompassed consideration by the state court of the merits of federal constitutional questions, thus requiring the state court to make an "antecedent" ruling on federal law before applying the Dixon bar to any federal constitutional claims. Accordingly, the Ninth Circuit reasoned, every time a California state court reviewed a state habeas petition and found that its own state-law fundamental-error exception did not apply to

forgive a state default, as in this case, the state court had necessarily reached and decided the underlying merits of the federal constitution claim, and had concluded that no federal constitutional error had occurred. Appendix B.

In response to this opinion, the Attorney General filed a petition for rehearing and a suggestion for rehearing en banc. The Attorney General contended that the Ninth Circuit's account of California state law was mistaken in several crucial respects, including a serious misinterpretation of Robbins. Accordingly, the state also filed a motion to certify two questions of state law to the California Supreme Court, including whether, at any time, California law had in fact obligated a state court reviewing a state habeas petition to reach and determine the merits of a federal constitutional claim before imposing a state procedural bar.[1]

On January 21, 2000, the Ninth Circuit issued an amended opinion, correcting several of its errors of state law but reaching the same result. The court affirmed the district court's dismissal of three of Park's claims, including improper consolidation, erroneous admission of the tapes, and ineffective assistance of counsel. However, the Ninth Circuit reversed the district court's order dismissing two of Park's claims on grounds of procedural default, including failure to disclose information about the status of an informant, and denial of the right to speedy trial. Park v. California, et al., 202 F.3d 1146, 1154-55 (9th Cir. 2000).

The Ninth Circuit held that in Robbins, the California

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1. California law permits the state supreme court to "answer questions of law certified to it by the Supreme Court of the United States, a United States Court of Appeals, or the court of last resort of any state, territory, or commonwealth provided that [¶] (1) the certifying court requests the answer; [¶](2) the questions may be determinative of a cause pending in the certifying court; and [¶](3) the decisions of the California appellate courts provide no controlling precedent concerning the certified question." Cal. Rules of Court, Rule 29.5.

Supreme Court "acknowledged" that prior to the date of that decision on August 3, 1998, California appellate courts "necessarily addressed fundamental constitutional claims when applying the Dixon rule." Park, at 1152. Based upon this premise, the federal court held that, since Park raised federal constitutional issues in his state habeas petition, "the denial of Park's petition citing to Dixon was not independent of federal law and does not preclude federal habeas review." Id. The Ninth Circuit summarily denied the motion to certify questions of state law to the California Supreme Court in a footnote. Park, 202 F.3d at 1148, n. 1.

The Attorney General filed a second petition for rehearing and suggestion for rehearing en banc, again urging the court of appeals to certify to the California Supreme Court the question whether California law at any time obligated a state court under Dixon to reach and determine the merits of a federal constitutional claim before imposing a bar. On March 9, 2000, the Ninth Circuit denied the petition for rehearing. Appendix F.

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE WRIT

Federal courts are barred from reviewing on habeas corpus a state prisoner's federal claims if he has defaulted them in state court under an independent and adequate state rule of procedure. Coleman v. Thompson, 501 U.S. 722, 750 (1991). A "habeas petitioner who has failed to meet the State's procedural requirements for presenting his federal claims has deprived the state courts of an opportunity to address those claims in the first instance." Id. at 732.

Continuing its systematic dismantling of California's procedural defaults as bars to federal collateral review, the Ninth Circuit has now held that California's most basic appellate bar is not independent of federal law. Certiorari should be granted for three separate reasons.

First, the Ninth Circuit's holding is so broadly stated that it jeopardizes all California state procedural bars imposed in cases prior to August 3, 1998, including more than 500 unresolved capital cases, in which the California Supreme Court frequently disposes of successive, abusive and stale claims on grounds of procedural default.[2] The opinion is also a patent affront to comity.

In common with most jurisdictions, California prohibits collateral review on habeas corpus of claims that could have been raised on direct appeal. In re Dixon, 41 Cal.2d at 759. This is a nearly universal procedural rule, one which this Court has repeatedly upheld. Murray v. Carrier, 477 U.S. 478, 489-91 (1986); Smith v. Murray, 477 U.S. 527, 533-35 (1986); Reed v. Ross, 468 U.S. 1, 10 (1984).

In this case, the Ninth Circuit held that the Dixon rule is not independent of federal law based upon its interpretation of statements in In re Robbins, 18 Cal.4th at 814, n. 34. The Ninth Circuit concluded that in Robbins, the "California Supreme Court recently stated that prior to 1998 it necessarily addressed fundamental constitutional claims when applying the Dixon rule." Park, at 1152. The federal court noted that the California Supreme Court stated that when it imposed the Dixon bar, it meant to signify that the state court had concluded that "none of the four exceptions" to the default rule apply. One of those exceptions is the familiar "fundamental constitutional rights" exception. The Ninth

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2. The jeopardy is not speculative. The decision in this case is spreading rapidly, and its rationale is being used in published cases to invalidate other bars. See Washington v. Cambra, 208 F.3d 832, 833-34 (9th Cir. 2000); Havey v. Hubbard, 2000 U.S. App. LEXIS 8871 (9th Cir. May 1, 2000); La Crosse v. Kernan, 2000 U.S. App. LEXIS 7348 (9th Cir. April 24, 2000)(applied to untimeliness bar); Jackson v. Calderon, 2000 U.S. App. LEXIS 9049 (9th Cir. May 8, 2000)(applied to untimeliness bar in capital case).

Circuit inferred that, in checking to see whether any of the claims stated an exception to the Dixon bar, the state court necessarily reached and decided the merits of all federal claims.

The result of this interpretation of Robbins is perverse. It transforms a commonplace, limited, discretionary state procedural rule into a mandatory, plenary merits review rule for all alleged federal constitutional errors in all cases.

The Ninth Circuit's holding is also profoundly mistaken. It is based on a fundamental misinterpretation of California state law, as well as on unwarranted and inaccurate speculation about the internal practices of the California Supreme Court. This speculation is based upon nothing more than the Ninth Circuit's misinterpretation of a passage about the elements of a legal standard modified in Robbins. The announcement of a modified element of a fundamental constitutional error exception, without more, cannot reasonably be viewed as a statement of historical practice in thousands of California habeas corpus cases.

The Ninth Circuit's misinterpretation of California state law is made completely untenable by its refusal to certify the underlying state-law questions to the California Supreme Court for an authoritative statement of that Court's practice. Instead of turning to the state court for the proper interpretation of state law, the Ninth Circuit insists on its own tendentious and erroneous version of that law. This, too, offends comity.

Second, the opinion in this case is premised upon a basic misapprehension of the operation of traditional state plain/fundamental constitutional error exceptions. Such reviews are simply not interchangeable with a mandatory constitutional merits review. In committing this error, the Ninth Circuit disregarded important dicta from this Court, and created an inter-circuit conflict with most other circuit courts that have considered the validity of state law

plain/fundamental error rules. See e.g., Simpson v. Matesanz, 175 F.3d 200, 209 (1st Cir. 1999). No other circuit has made this rudimentary error, and the conflict created by this decision requires resolution by this Court.

Finally, the Ninth Circuit's decision violates the rule of O'Sullivan v. Boerckel, 526 U.S. 838 (1999), which holds that a prisoner who fails to present his claims in a timely petition for discretionary review to a state court of last resort has not properly presented his claims through the normal established appellate process and therefore defaults his claims as a matter of federal law. Id.at 845, 848.

The Ninth Circuit acknowledges the O'Sullivan rule, but finds it inapplicable by concluding that the O'Sullivan federal bar is lifted when a state court imposes its bar for failure to raise a claim on appeal. The Ninth Circuit held that since California "provided Park a second chance" by giving him the limited opportunity to obtain forgiveness of the state bar, and Park "took advantage of it," the O'Sullivan federal bar was lifted. Park, 202 F.3d at 1153-54. This interpretation turns O'Sullivan on its head.

Under O'Sullivan, Park's failure to avail himself of his normal appellate remedy, in and of itself, meant that he failed to properly exhaust his state remedies, and his claims are now procedurally barred as a matter of federal, not state, law. O'Sullivan, 528 U.S. at 848. Bypassing the normal appellate review system, plain and simple, defaults the claim for federal collateral review purposes, regardless of whether the prisoner later asks the state court to forgive his default by finding an extraordinary exception which might warrant collateral review. Certiorari should also be granted to correct this basic misapplication of O'Sullivan.

ARGUMENT

I.

THE NINTH CIRCUIT ERRED IN HOLDING THAT THE CALIFORNIA SUPREME COURT "ACKNOWLEDGED" THAT IN APPLYING ITS FUNDAMENTAL ERROR EXCEPTION FOR PROCEDURAL BARS, IT NECESSARILY REACHED AND DETERMINED ALL UNDERLYING FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONAL CLAIMS

The decision in this case is based upon an egregious misstatement of California state law. The Ninth Circuit's account of the history of California's procedural bars is rife with errors, and lacks the basic comity due the state court. This decision is only the most recent manifestation of Ninth Circuit's persistent antagonism to California's procedural bars. For several years, the Ninth Circuit has repeatedly invalidated California's basic procedural bars on the ground that they were inadequate to bar federal review.[3] Here, the Ninth Circuit, for the first time, finds a crucial California bar dependent on federal law.

California, like most jurisdictions, requires defendants to raise claims on direct appeal when possible, and bars collateral review of those claims on habeas when they have not been presented on appeal. In re Dixon, 41

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3. The Ninth Circuit has found California's timeliness, successive-petition, and Dixon bars inadequate to bar federal review on many occasions. See Fields v. Calderon, 125 F.3d 757, 765 (9th Cir. 1997)(Dixon bar inadequate); Calderon v. U.S. District Court (Hayes), 103 F.3d 72, 75 (9th Cir. 1996)(Dixon and timeliness bars inadequate); Calderon v. U. S. District Court (Bean), 96 F.3d 1126, 1128-31 (9th Cir. 1996)(timeliness bar inadequate); Morales v. Calderon, 85 F.3d 1387, 1388 (9th Cir. 1996)(timeliness bar inadequate); Siripongs v. Calderon, 35 F.3d 1308, 1318 (9th Cir. 1994)(successive-petition bar inadequate).

Cal.2d at 759. In 1993, the California Supreme Court reviewed and explained its practice concerning imposition of the Dixon bar, and other bars, in In re Harris, 5 Cal.4th 813, 855 P.2d 391 (1993) and In re Clark, 5 Cal.4th 750, 855 P.2d 729 (1993). In Harris, the California Supreme Court defined the operation of an exception to the Dixon bar which involved a "clear and fundamental constitutional violation striking at the heart of the trial process." Harris, 5 Cal.4th at 836.

While the instant case was pending on appeal in the Ninth Circuit, the California Supreme Court issued its opinion in Robbins, which clarified the operation of the state-law "timeliness" bar. The Supreme Court in Robbins also included several brief comments about its procedures in applying other procedural bars, including the Dixon rule, which bars a claim that should have been raised on appeal.

The Ninth Circuit seized on several of these comments in Robbins to hold that the California Supreme Court had made an

> acknowledgment that the [fundamental] constitutional error exception encompassed consideration by the court of the merits of federal constitutional questions, [and that] the California Supreme Court necessarily made an antecedent ruling on federal law before applying the Dixon bar to any federal constitutional claims raised in Park's state habeas petition. That court did so by concluding that no fundamental federal constitutional error had occurred.

Park, at 1153. In other words, the Ninth Circuit finds that for the 45 years after Dixon in 1953 and before Robbins in 1998, the California Supreme Court engaged in the absurdly self-defeating practice of requiring itself and other California courts to reach and decide the merits of a federal constitutional claim in order to determine

whether the claim should be rejected summarily without reaching the merits. Nothing in Robbins, or in the history of California's procedural bar law, justifies ascribing such an inane purpose to the California Supreme Court. There is no support in Robbins for the sweeping conclusion that California's fundamental-constitutional-error exception under Dixon or Harris requires plenary merits review of all constitutional claims in all cases.

On the contrary, the Robbins decision itself emphatically refutes the Ninth Circuit's assumption. In Robbins, the California Supreme Court described the manner in which it had historically conducted a review for procedural bar, before Robbins. The Court stated that,

> although our orders frequently address the merits when procedural bars apply, commonly they do not. Of the approximately 1,500 noncapital habeas corpus petitions disposed of annually by this court, a substantial proportion of our denial orders, representing hundreds of claims, typically rests solely on procedural grounds. In capital habeas corpus matters, although our orders frequently resolve claims both on procedural grounds and on the merits, we have on occasion denied claims solely on procedural grounds. [Citations.] In no event is merit review invariable or obligatory when a procedural bar applies.

Robbins, 18 Cal.4th at 778, n. 1, emphasis added. In this passage, the California Supreme Court explains what it does not do, and has not done, when it reviews a state habeas petition to determine whether to impose a procedural bar. It does not conduct an "invariable or obligatory" merits review. This is a statement of historical practice, not the announcement of a new, prospective procedure. Remarkably, the Ninth Circuit's decision ignores this explicit statement and concludes that the

California Supreme Court states just the opposite in Robbins.

The Attorney General quoted and relied upon this passage in the both his petitions for rehearing. The court of appeals simply ignored the point. By refusing to deal with this unambiguous statement, the Ninth Circuit lost sight of one of the most important limitations on a federal court reviewing state court actions: "the views of the State's highest court with respect to state law are binding on the federal courts." Wainwright v. Goode, 464 U.S. 78, 84 (1983). The Ninth Circuit's rendition of state law is not only inimical to the state's interests in preserving its convictions from stale and piecemeal claims. It also conspicuously contradicts the California Supreme Court's own interpretation of state law.

The underlying premise of the Ninth Circuit's remarkable conclusion comes from the following passage in Robbins, which considers the application of the exception for "error of constitutional magnitude" in Clark[4]:

> Although the [first] exception is phrased in terms of error of constitutional magnitude -- which obviously may include federal constitutional claims -- in applying this exception and finding it inapplicable we shall, in this case and in the future, adopt the following approach as our standard practice: We need not and will not decide whether the alleged error actually constitutes a federal constitutional violation.

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4. In the first petition for rehearing, the Attorney General pointed out that the panel had mistakenly found that Clark and Harris had "identical" "constitutional error" exceptions." First Pet. for Reh. at 3-11. The panel's second opinion corrects some of the state-law errors in the first opinion, but it nonetheless continues to be based upon a statement in Clark which does not directly apply to Dixon bars.

> Instead, we shall assume, for the purpose of addressing the procedural issue, that a federal constitutional error is stated, and we shall find the exception inapposite if, based upon our application of state law, it cannot be said that the asserted error "led to a trial that was so fundamentally unfair that absent the error no reasonable judge or jury would have convicted the petitioner." [Citation.]

Robbins, 18 Cal.4th 811-12.

Nothing in this passage "acknowledges" that a review by a California state court of a state habeas petition prior to August 3, 1998, which involved checking for exceptions to state procedural bars, "encompassed consideration by the court of the merits of federal constitutional questions. . . ." Park, 202 F.3d at 1153. Nothing in this passage says that, before August 3, 1998, the California Supreme Court reached and decided the merits of every federal constitutional claim when it reviewed state habeas petitions. Nothing in this passage even hints that the California Supreme Court actually reached the merits in any previous case, or in any significant number of cases under Dixon or Harris or Clark, let alone in Park's case under Dixon or Harris. In fact, in the footnote attached to this passage, the court used the present tense to explain that "whenever we apply the first three Clark exceptions [including the fundamental constitutional violation exception], we do so exclusively by reference to state law." Robbins, 18 Cal.4th at 811, n. 32, emphasis added. This statement means that, at least since Clark and Harris, the first three California state-law exceptions have been applied with reference to state law. The passage thus completely undercuts the Ninth Circuit's interpretation of Robbins.

In Coleman v. Thompson, this Court cautioned that federal courts reviewing fundamental error exceptions to procedural bars should act only on the basis of explicit

state-court policies. The Court noted that the Virginia Supreme Court had, on one occasion, "reviewed the merits of constitutional claims before deciding whether to dismiss an appeal as untimely." Coleman, 501 U.S. at 742. The Court refused to draw an inference against the overall state practice from that one case:

> There is no evidence other than O'Brien that the Virginia Supreme Court has ever conducted such a review, and O'Brien explicitly declined to announce such a practice. We decline Coleman's invitation to announce such a practice for that court.

Id. at 743-44, emphasis added. In the absence of a clear statement from the California Supreme Court that, prior to Robbins, California courts conducted a merits review of all federal constitutional claims before deciding whether to impose a state procedural bar, the Ninth Circuit should have given heed to this Court's admonition to decline to announce procedural rules for the state court.

Perhaps most remarkably, the court of appeals reached its result despite the ready availability of the certification procedure, which would resolve the underlying state-law question in the state supreme court, where it belongs. Respondent's motion to certify two questions to the California Supreme Court was summarily denied in the Ninth Circuit's second opinion. Park, 202 F.3d at 1148, n. 1. In denying certification, the Ninth Circuit has chosen to adhere to its own mistaken rendition of California's historical procedural bar practice, shunning the definitive account so readily available from the state Supreme Court.

Respondent twice urged the Ninth Circuit to certify the following question to the California Supreme Court:

> At any time, has California law obligated a state court under In re Dixon, [citation], or In re Harris, [citation], to reach and determine the

merits of a federal constitutional claim before imposing a bar?

The Ninth Circuit's entire analysis hinges on its own mistaken answer to this question. This Court should correct that mistake, and avoid the "friction-generating error" brought about by the Ninth Circuit's speculation. Arizonans for Official English v. Arizona, 520 U.S. 43, 75 (1997). The answer to the question is, in every way, a state-law matter, and it should come from the California Supreme Court, not from the Ninth Circuit.

This Court has strongly endorsed the practice of certifying questions of state law to state courts for their authoritative answers. In Fiore v. White, 120 S. Ct. 469, 473 (1999), this Court certified a question to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court because "the answer to this question will help determine the proper state-law predicate for our determination of the federal constitutional questions raised in this case." Certification is even more urgently required here, where the Ninth Circuit has indulged in a construction of California state law that threatens to set at naught all remaining state procedural bars imposed before August 3, 1998.

In Arizonans for Official English, the Court held that the district court and the Ninth Circuit erred in refusing to certify questions of state law to the Arizona Supreme Court. The Court cautioned that the certification procedure was designed "to avoid federal-court error in deciding state-law questions antecedent to federal constitutional issues. . . ." Id., 520 U.S. at 75. The certification process replaces gratuitous speculation and avoids the risk that the federal tribunal will engage in such needlessly abrasive error with a system designed for "reducing the delay, cutting the cost, and increasing the assurance of gaining an authoritative response" to state-law questions. Id. at 75-76. Granting the state's certification motions would have "save[d] 'time, energy, and resources and help[ed] build a cooperative judicial

federalism.'" Id. at 77. Clearly, then, "the certification requests merited more respectful consideration than they received in the proceedings below." Id. at 78.

The Ninth Circuit has issued an opinion which is breathtaking in its sweep, and ominous in its implications for the remainder of all California's procedural bars imposed before August 3, 1998. There is simply no support for the court of appeals' finding that the plain/fundamental constitutional error exception to the Dixon default rule requires plenary merits review in all cases. On the contrary, there are statements in Robbins itself which completely refute the Ninth Circuit's conclusion. At a bare minimum, however, those statements should have prompted the Ninth Circuit to certify the issue to the California Supreme Court for its account of what it does, and has done, when applying its own exceptions to its own procedural bars. Anything less is an affront to comity.

II.

THE NINTH CIRCUIT'S HOLDING THAT THE APPLICATION OF A FUNDAMENTAL ERROR EXCEPTION FOR A STATE PROCEDURAL BAR RENDERS THE BAR DEPENDENT ON FEDERAL LAW CONFLICTS WITH TWO DECISIONS FROM THIS COURT AND WITH OTHER CIRCUIT DECISIONS

The Ninth Circuit's holding that a state plain/fundamental constitutional error exception is invalid because it is interwoven with federal law sharply conflicts with dicta from two decisions of this Court, and with decisions from many other circuit courts. Those decisions all grasp the distinction between the operation of the fundamental or plain-error exception for procedural bars and a plenary merits review. The Ninth Circuit does not. This conflict merits review on certiorari.

Most federal courts have affirmed the validity of fundamental-error exceptions to state procedural bars. Indeed, this Court has drawn a clear distinction between a review for fundamental error and review for federal constitutional error. In Sochor v. Florida, 504 U.S. 527 (1992), the Court found the suggestion that a review for fundamental error regarding a state bar implied a rejection of a federal constitutional claim an "Olympic stretch." Id., at 534 n. 9. Even more to the point, in Engle v. Isaac, 456 U.S. 107 (1981), this Court approved Ohio's plain-error rule, which excuses procedural defaults "only in 'exceptional circumstances,' such as where, 'but for the error, the outcome of the trial clearly would have been otherwise.' [Citation.]" Id. at 125 n. 27. The Court explained that if Ohio had forgiven the default and

> exercised its discretion to consider respondents' claim, then their initial default would no longer

> block federal review. [Citations.] Our opinions, however, make clear that the States have the primary responsibility to interpret and apply their plain-error rules. Certainly we should not rely upon a state plain-error rule when the State has refused to apply that rule to the very sort of claim at issue.

Id. at 135 n. 44. In this case, the Ninth Circuit has simply lost sight of this important limitation on the reach of a federal habeas court, assuming for itself the responsibility and authority to "interpret and apply" California's procedural bar exceptions. On this ground alone, the Ninth Circuit's decision should be reversed.

Most of the federal circuits which have addressed this issue concur with this Court's remarks in Sochor and Engle. That is, most federal courts understand that a review for "fundamental constitutional error," especially as a possible exception to a state procedural bar, is simply not a merits review.

In many states, including California, the state court applying a procedural bar has discretion to address a defaulted federal constitutional issue "only to determine whether it ought to disregard its waiver rule on the ground that the federal constitutional issue constitutes 'fundamental error.'" Willis v. Aiken, 8 F.3d 556, 562 (7th Cir. 1993). In Willis, the court expressed the widespread understanding that "fundamental error" is "a term of art employed on a fact-specific basis for the purpose of determining whether to excuse noncompliance" with a procedural default. Id. at 566. Citing the Tenth Circuit decision in Gutierrez v. Moriarity, 922 F.2d 1464, 1469 (10th Cir. 1991), the Willis court explained that characterizing the error as "fundamental" "appears to be far more a function of the error's relationship to the policy concerns animating the state's [procedural bar] than of federal constitutional policy concerns." Willis, 8 F.3d at 567. Accordingly, state law mandates "review on the

merits of fundamental rights claims only when the denial of the right 'gives rise to a question of fundamental error as defined by state law.' [Citation]." Id.

Judge Posner explained this point even more directly. In Neal v. Gramley, 99 F.3d 841 (7th Cir. 1996), he noted that Illinois, like California and many other states,

> provides a safety valve for situations in which enforcing a procedural default would mask a plain error. [Citations.] To decide whether an error is plain requires consideration of the merits--but only so far as may be required to determine that issue. It does not open up the merits any wider for consideration by the federal court. [Citations.] It is the same with the closely related Illinois rule relating to fundamental deficiencies in the postconviction process. The determination of deficiency may require a glance at the merits; it does not open up the merits to plenary consideration by the federal court.

Id. at 844. The "fact that the state court in the second round of post-conviction proceedings touched on the merits of Neal's federal constitutional claim does not permit us to disregard the default." Id. at 843. In Park, the Ninth Circuit has obliterated the state "safety valve," and has confused a simple "glance," merely "touching" on allegations of constitutional error, with a comprehensive merits determination.

Most of the federal appellate courts to have considered this issue have avoided the Ninth Circuit's conceptual lapse. See Wilson v. Moore, 178 F.3d 266, 276 (4th Cir. 1999); Simpson v. Matesanz, 175 F.3d 200, 205 (1st Cir. 1999); Tarver v. Hopper, 169 F.3d 710, 712 (11th Cir. 1999); Mu'Min v. Pruett, 125 F.3d 192, 197 (4th Cir. 1997); Andrews v. Deland, 943 F.2d 1162, 1189 (10th Cir. 1991). The reasoning behind the conclusion in these cases was well articulated in McCown v. Callahan, 726 F.2d 1 (1st Cir. 1984). There, the First Circuit concluded that if

federal habeas courts were inclined to find that state fundamental error review undermined state procedural rules,

> the state either would have to convert what is often a speedy reviewing task into a full scale detailed examination of federal law or it would have to abandon "miscarriage of justice" review altogether. The latter alternative seems highly undesirable. The former conflicts with the theory of Wainwright. That is to say, a state's efforts to stop gross miscarriages of justice should not suddenly force it to grapple with complex federal issues that its procedural rules would otherwise lawfully bar.

Id., 726 F.2d at 3-4.

In its determination to invalidate California procedural bars altogether, the Ninth Circuit lost sight of these salutary practical considerations. California's default review is identical in its operation to the plain/fundamental error review in most states with traditional procedural bars. That review is not the same as federal constitutional merits review. For the reasons so strongly articulated by the other circuits, California's Dixon/Harris bar is independent of federal law.

There is no doubt that California has traditionally defined its fundamental error review as a state-law process. In the seminal case of In re Winchester, 53 Cal.2d 528, 348 P.2d 904 (1960), the California Supreme Court explained that, for purposes of ascertaining which claims may be heard in habeas, exceptions are defined "as a miscarriage of justice within the meaning of that phrase as used in section 4 1/2, article VI, of the Constitution of this state." Id. at 531, emphasis added. In Harris, the court observed that "not all alleged constitutional defects warrant the opportunity to relitigate the issue on habeas corpus." Harris, 5 Cal.4th at 830.

Most crucially, however, in Robbins, the case the Ninth Circuit found dispositive, the California Supreme Court noted that, "[i]n no event is merit review invariable or obligatory when a procedural bar applies." Robbins, 18 Cal.4th at 778 n. 1. The Ninth Circuit erred when it failed to defer to the California Supreme Court's interpretation of state law. In particular, the Ninth Circuit violated comity by refusing to defer to the California Supreme Court's statements that fundamental error review is not "mandatory," does not confine itself to federal constitutional error, and does not even consider every allegation of federal constitutional error. Wainwright v. Goode, 464 U.S. at 84. Since California's default review is not the same as federal constitutional merits review, its Dixon bar is independent of federal law. Certiorari should be granted to correct the Ninth Circuit's aberrant and unsound interpretation of fundamental error review, and to resolve the conflict it creates with other circuits.

III.

THE NINTH CIRCUIT VIOLATED O'SULLIVAN V. BOERCKEL BY FINDING THAT THE FILING OF THE STATE HABEAS PETITION LIFTED THE BAR TO FEDERAL COURT REVIEW

The Ninth Circuit's decision also violates the rule of O'Sullivan v. Boerckel, in which this Court held that, as a matter of comity, "state prisoners must give the state courts one full opportunity to resolve any constitutional issues by invoking one complete round of the State's established appellate review process." Id., 526 U.S. at 845. There is no dispute in this case that Park did not afford the California courts that one complete round of appellate review. Under O'Sullivan, where state law has "an established, normal appellate review procedure" (id., at 845), it does not matter whether a state prisoner, after forgoing that procedure, might seek to obtain a merits review on collateral review by attempting to establish a fundamental error exception to the state's procedural rule. Under O'Sullivan, Park's failure to abide by California's Dixon rule requiring appellate presentation of claims, without more, means that he failed to properly exhaust his state remedies, and his claims are now procedurally barred as a matter of federal law. O'Sullivan, at 845-47.

In O'Sullivan, the Court re-emphasized the inseparability of the procedural default doctrine and the exhaustion rule, explaining that vigilant enforcement of a state's procedural default rules is necessary to protect the integrity of the federal exhaustion requirement. Id. at 848. More recently, in Edwards v. Carpenter, 120 S. Ct. 1587, 2000 U.S. LEXIS 2992, *13-14 (2000), the Court reiterated its long-standing policy that the purposes of the exhaustion requirement would be frustrated

> were we to allow federal review to a prisoner who had presented his claim to the state court, but in such a manner that the state court could not, consistent with its own procedural rules, have entertained it. In such circumstances, though the prisoner would have "concededly exhausted his state remedies," it could hardly be said that, as comity and federalism require, the State had been given a "fair 'opportunity to pass upon [his claims].'" [Citation.]

Id., 2000 U.S. LEXIS 2992, at *14. In this sense Park's failure to abide by California's Dixon rule is the failure of fair presentation described in O'Sullivan and Edwards.

The Ninth Circuit attempts to circumvent O'Sullivan by holding that "it appears as a matter of federal law that Park escaped the inchoate federal habeas consequences of his failure" to exhaust his appellate remedies by filing a state habeas petition. Park, 202 F.3d at 1153. The Ninth Circuit relies on Ylst v. Nunnemaker, 501 U.S. 797, 801 (1991), for the proposition that if "the last state court to be presented with a federal claim reaches the merits, it removes any bar to federal court review that might otherwise have been available." The Ninth Circuit concludes that, although Park had no right to a review of his claims, he did have a right to raise his claims, and that is all that § 2254(c) requires. Park, 202 F.3d at 1153-54. This analysis is wrong in two respects.

First, the Ninth Circuit's reliance on Nunnemaker is entirely circular, since it depends on the fallacious premise that the California Supreme Court necessarily reached the merits of Park's habeas petition. Second, and even more importantly, the Ninth Circuit misapprehends the scope of the O'Sullivan bar.

O'Sullivan describes a federal bar imposed upon a finding that the prisoner has not properly presented an appellate claim. The determination of whether to impose that bar does not depend on the complex questions of

independence and adequacy, or the "plain statement" rule of Harris v. Reed, 489 U.S. 255, 269-70 (1989). On the contrary, as this Court explained in Coleman, such rules do

> not apply if the petitioner failed to exhaust state remedies and the court to which the petitioner would be required to present his claims in order to meet the exhaustion requirement would now find the claims procedurally barred. In such a case there is a procedural default for purposes of federal habeas regardless of the decision of the last state court to which the petitioner actually presented his claims. See Harris v. Reed, 478 U.S. 255, 269-270, 103 L. Ed. 2d 308, 109 S. Ct. 1038 (1989)(O'CONNOR, J., concurring); Teague v. Lane, 489 U.S. 288, 297-298, 103 L. Ed. 2d 334, 109 S. Ct. 1060 (1989).

Coleman, 501 U.S. at 735 n. 1, emphasis added. That federal bar goes into effect when the prisoner fails to exhaust his available appellate remedy, as, in this case, when he fails to present his claims on direct appeal. It is not lifted when he seeks the chance for a discretionary collateral hearing on the basis of a state-law exception to a state procedural rule.

This case is even stronger than the situation defined in O'Sullivan. Here, the federal court was not asked to anticipate or predict what the state court might do, since the California Supreme Court has already unambiguously held by citing Dixon that Park defaulted his claims by failing to avail himself of his normal, established appellate remedy.

Under O'Sullivan, Park's claims are unexhausted and therefore procedurally barred. When he failed to present those claims on appeal, and certainly when he was later barred from doing so on habeas by an explicit order from the California Supreme Court, Park reached the dead end described in O'Sullivan. The Ninth Circuit thus erred by

interpreting O'Sullivan to permit the lifting of the federal bar when Park sought a second chance to raise his claims by attempting to qualify for a state-law exception to forgive his default.

IV.

THE NINTH CIRCUIT ERRED BY SUBJECTING CALIFORNIA'S PROCEDURAL RULES TO A MORE STRINGENT STANDARD THAN IT APPLIES TO THE INVOCATION OF A PARALLEL FEDERAL PROCEDURAL DEFAULT RULE

In Coleman, adverting to its own settled acceptance of the vital interest served by federal procedural bars, this Court plainly stated that a state's procedural bars were entitled to the same level of deference, in order to "eliminate inconsistency between the respect federal courts show for state procedural rules and the respect they show for their own." Coleman, 501 U.S. at 751. The Court has repeatedly insisted that there is "'no reason . . . to give greater preclusive effect to procedural defaults by federal defendants than to similar defaults by state defendants. To hold otherwise would reflect an anomalous and erroneous view of federal-state relations.'" Francis v. Henderson, 425 U.S. 536, 542 (1976), quoting Kaufman v. United States, 394 U.S. 217, 228 (1969).

In Reed v. Farley, 512 U.S. 339 (1994), the Court spoke even more plainly of the need for even-handed treatment of state and federal procedural rules: "We see no reason to afford habeas review to a state prisoner . . . who let a time clock run without alerting the trial court, yet deny collateral review to a federal prisoner similarly situated." Id. at 354.

The Ninth Circuit does not administer procedural rules with the impartiality and comity required by this Court. In habeas corpus actions brought be federal prisoners, where its own judgments are at stake, the Ninth Circuit takes a hard line:

> Section 2255 is not designed to provide criminal defendants repeated opportunities to overturn their convictions on grounds which could have been raised on direct appeal. The Supreme Court has held that where a criminal defendant fails to make allegations of error at trial or on direct appeal he must demonstrate [cause and actual prejudice].

United States v. Dunham, 767 F.2d 1395, 1396 (9th Cir. 1985), citing United States v. Frady, 456 U.S. 152, 168 (1982), and Davis v. United States, 411 U.S. 233, 236-45 (1973); see also United States v. Johnson, 988 F.2d 941, 945 (9th Cir. 1993) (once defendant's chance to appeal has been waived or exhausted, it is presumed he stands fairly and finally convicted, especially when he already has had a fair opportunity to present his federal claims to a federal forum); Abatino v. United States, 750 F.2d 1442, 1445 (9th Cir. 1984) (where petitioners failed to object at trial and failed to raise of-record issue on direct appeal, they committed a double procedural default).

When it comes to California's parallel procedural rules, however, the Ninth Circuit's hard line is applied against the state courts themselves, not against the defaulting prisoners. This, too, offends comity, and warrants review on certiorari.

CONCLUSION

The petition for a writ of certiorari should be granted.

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Respectfully submitted,

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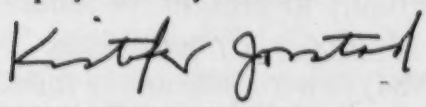

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